



Sweet Success: A Veteran Entrepreneur on a Mission

For the best in homemade barbeque sandwiches, look no farther than Rome, NY. Business at Barbi-Q's is booming, thanks in part to Patriot Express, an SBA-backed loan program for veteran entrepreneurs.

Barbara "Barbi" Pannone learned about the Patriot Express loan program when her company was catering the grand opening of the Oneida Savings Bank branch on the Griffiss Business Park last June. She met Douglas Bartell, OSB vice president and regional lender, while he was enjoying one of her specialty sandwiches at the celebration. Barbara discussed her dream to grow the business beyond one truck to a permanent location, and found more than a customer---she gained a small business lending partner who found the right loan program to help achieve her dream.

The Patriot Express loan program was launched by the U.S. Small Business Administration a year ago this month; since then, 25 loans worth \$2.6 million dollars to veterans and spouses have been made in the 34 counties of SBA's Syracuse District.

The program encourages commercial lenders to make small business loans to members of the extended military community with three main features: SBA's fastest turn around time for loan approvals, SBA's lowest interest rates for business loans that range from 2.25 to 4.75 percent over prime, and SBA's guaranty of 75-85% depending on the size of the loan.

Eligible military community members include veterans, service-disabled veterans, active duty members in the Transition Assistance Program, reservists, National Guard members, current spouses, and widowed spouses of veterans who died in service or from a service-connected disability.

Rome native Barbara (Kotary) Pannone first left her hometown at age 18 for a three year enlistment in the U.S. Army. While stationed in Germany from 1980-1982, Barbi worked as an administrative specialist and became highly skilled in computer programming.

Four years ago, Barbi knew she wanted to have her own business, she sold property and borrowed money from friends to get "Barbi-Q's" up and running in East Utica. After purchasing an equipped 1979 cube van for \$8,500 and painting it majestic purple, Barbi quit her job and spent weeks making renovations to the vehicle. After a few months of selling barbeque and other specialty sandwiches from the truck in Utica, Barbi moved her home and business to Rome.

Barbi and her husband Rich gained loyal customers with a daily route on the Griffiss Business Park, visiting different businesses and various construction sites. They found that their 14' cube van could no longer accommodate the amount of people they were feeding.

“Word of mouth has been our best form of advertisement since the very beginning, and that is because we take pride in what we do. Feeding the construction crews during the building of the Family Dollar Distribution Center was the big break for the business,” according to Barbi. “We actually began to make a profit.”

With the \$75,000 Patriot Express loan approved in the fall of 2007, Barbi was able to completely renovate the company's original truck, purchase and custom build a second truck, and build out their leased space near Griffiss Business Park. Barbi-Q's offers a full breakfast, lunch and dinner menu to customers in addition to their full catering menu.

You can find Barbi and Rich at their restaurant Monday through Friday and on the weekends you'll find them on one of their trucks catering some large fun event. The cozy restaurant has seating for 24 to eat, but don't be surprised if the restaurant seems empty if you stop by. Over 80% of Barbi-Q's business is call in, with orders from surrounding businesses that either are picked up or delivered by Barbi-Q's. Many employees at the business park are regular customers at Barbi-Q's, known on a first-name basis.

“Part of our success has been our focus on our customers-we know their names, we know what they like and don't like. Whether they eat a different sandwich each time they visit or not, we want them to stay our customers,” said Barbi. “It is quite awesome to own my own business in my hometown. I'm thankful for the people in this community who have gone out of their way to support us.”